

CHAPTER 104

July 31, 2011

“It’s finally over...”

Justin awoke with a wide grin as he stared up at the ceiling, getting a good night’s rest from the terrors that had befallen him the day prior. Every bone in his body was still screaming out in pain, but he didn’t care. It just felt good knowing that everything would be going back to normal now. There would be no more murders, or Midnight Channel, or investigations, or Personas, or shadows, or anything. It would just be Justin living the life of a normal teenager. And after all he had suffered in his lifespan, it was long overdue. And so when he finally awoke, he couldn’t help but laugh a bit with glee as the sun shone into his room. In a way, it was like summer vacation was only just beginning today; not because it was the first day of summer break that the team hadn’t been tracking Mitsuo down, but rather because it was the first day Justin was free. Free of that god forsaken channel that had haunted him his whole life; manipulating his life and everyone around him, destroying the very fabrics of their souls and sanity. And everyone had prevailed. They didn’t just beat the killer... They beat the Midnight Channel. And hopefully this time it would stay down.

Justin pushed himself out of the bed, though not in the way he normally did where he’d smack his head against the floor to wake up. He simply turned towards the end of the bed and stood up, for what seemed the first time in ages. He didn’t need any motivation to get up today; to awake to his miserable excuse for a life. Because suddenly, his life seemed a lot less miserable. The murders were over, he had all his friends, he had Chie... Really, his life looked pretty damn good right about now. The only thing he didn’t have was his sanity... But then, his shadow had thrived off that purple shit that shadows spewed out when they died. The murders were over, and with that, so was Justin’s shadow’s chances of absorbing more shadows. And given the way his head seemed to buzz right now, his shadow wasn’t too pleased about that. Now all he had to do was stay away from mirrors and puddles, and he should be set for life.

Justin slowly crept down the stairs of his house, throwing on a shirt as he descended the staircase. Nothing particularly funny or anything; just those two light bulbs from the cover of the Era Vulgaris album. He had been careful not to make too much noise as he slowly made his way to the kitchen, figuring Maya would be asleep right now. She was pretty out of it last night after all; Justin probably understood that more than anyone, what with her sparing damn near every drop of her being to mend Justin’s broken body. He hadn’t expected that of her, especially with the cold way he had been treating her. He always knew he was being a dick, but he figured she deserved it. She had broke his heart a little bit that day when she

told him that he couldn't protect the people he loved; that he wouldn't be able to save her if something happened again. And even as angry as he was at her, as much as he wished she would just go away, he couldn't just stand by when Mitsuo's shadow tried to target her. Maya had told him he wouldn't be able to protect the people he cared about. He intended to show her just how wrong she was. And so he jumped in front of the blow. Some might call him a suicidal maniac; but Justin? He'd like to think he just did what anyone would do for family. And even when he should have lied there in agonizing pain, slowly withering away into the cold grip of unconsciousness, Maya helped him. After all he had did, she didn't give the slightest fuck; she just cared that he was alright... He died a little on the inside to think he had been mad at Maya after that. She cared about Justin... She wouldn't purposely go out of the way to hurt him; especially not with a remark like that.

Justin continued marching down the stairs, hoping to sneak outside without waking Maya. But alas, it seemed Maya had been wide awake and watching some bullshit on television. She was smiling at whatever it was she was watching... Or perhaps she was smiling at the figure of Justin marching down the stairs out of the corner of her eye. Whatever it was, she was happy. And Justin in turn grew happier. They never did say sorry to each other about what had happened prior to Justin taking a blast of energy to his stomach, and they never would. Actions spoke much louder than words after all. Maya grinned at Justin as she turned away from the screen for a moment.

"Oh hey, Justin!" Maya called out cheerfully as Justin walked over to where she was sitting on the couch. She balled up her legs slightly to give Justin room to sit next to her. He had no intention to sit prior to her making that move, but alas, he had no objections. It would be nice to just sit down and let the time pass as they did whatever teenagers normally did when they had nothing to do. It felt good just sitting there watching the television blink. It reminded Justin that you could be different and still live a normal life. And really, was there anything else he had wanted in the world?

"Whatchya' watching?" Justin questioned taking his place next to Maya on the couch, playing around a bit with the dog tags hanging from his neck; twirling them around between his fingers. He had to thank the gods that Maya hadn't noticed the third dog tag. That was sort of a special thing between the two. Of course, that wouldn't change just because Justin got a third one with Chie's name on it. After all, that was Maya's idea in the first place. No, it simply meant that he could exchange that sacred bond with someone else as well. It wasn't as exclusive as before, sure; but the significance was still there. Maya turned her attention back to the screen. Honestly, she didn't have any idea; it was just some show that had caught her attention while she was flipping channels.

"Beats the hell out of me. I guess it's supposed to be a 'where are they now,' kind of show, only with people I don't know." Maya remarked with slight confusion. It would

be nice if they actually showed who the hell these people were instead of just describing them. Justin turned his attention to the screen for a brief moment to see what could possibly be interesting Maya right about now. They were talking about some detective in his thirties who liked to cook, or something. Hell if Justin knew, he didn't have the faintest idea why someone like that would be on one of these shows. I mean, he was no rock star or celebrity, that much was for sure. And these shows usually were about people that people actually knew, not some random cop on the street.

Then they started talking about some journalist or something. Honestly, the description kind of reminded Justin of Maya... Minus the cheery attitude, of course. That's not to say that Maya wasn't a cheerful person. She was fairly positive actually, and god knows you had to have a good demeanor to get along with animals as much as she did. The fact of the matter was that Maya actually had a fairly short temper. You just had to yank the wrong chain and she'd explode right in her face. And god knows she could be really fucking bossy; it's the reason Justin started smoking after all. Then there were a bunch of people Justin could give less of a resemblance of a fuck about. Guy with long black hair is not exactly the most gripping person for the audience to want to know the fate of. Oh you mean he loses his cool when you mention his old job? News flash, it's his old job for a reason. Honestly, after only five minutes or so of this crap Justin was bored out of his mind. He just couldn't understand how Maya was so fascinated with this shit.

"It's all over now, huh?" Justin eventually spoke up, talking over the television program Maya was watching. She must not have been as interested in it as she seemed, because she seemed almost glad to do something other than watch this. Which was strange, because she had the remote. Perhaps she had just figured Justin was watching it. Or maybe she had forgotten where she put the remote and just said fuck it. Either way, she had no problem diverting her attention from the television monitor. She was certainly happy that all of this was over now; that much was painfully clear to Justin. The Midnight Channel had haunted her life for the last two years. Sure, maybe they hadn't destroyed the Midnight Channel completely, but they had put a stop to the man that was abusing it to ruin other's lives. And in a way, that was good enough for Maya. It was a symbolic victory, but that's all she needed to satisfy the shadow that lied deep in her heart. She wasn't afraid of the channel or what it had done to her anymore; because now, she knew with the help of her friends she could defeat it.

"It feels good, doesn't it?" Maya remarked, a wide grin sweeping across her face. Justin chuckled slightly before nodding. It was hard to explain why it felt as good as it did. This wasn't just the joy that one would normally associate with success; it was much more overpowering. Perhaps it was just the sense that something that had gone horribly wrong years ago had been put right in some regard yesterday. It was like laying a nightmare to rest that had squirmed and fought to escape from

Justin's heart for two straight years. It felt good; like ridding one's self of their personal demons. Even if Justin still had plenty of those, in more ways than one.

"I just don't know what to do now." Justin mused aloud, a grin still sweeping across his face. "We can all go back to living our own lives now, like none of this ever happened. Be normal, you know..."

"Normaler." Maya interrupted, correcting him. It was meant as a joke, but it was true in a certain regard. The team would never truly be normal after the things they had witnessed, after the manifestation of Persona had been revealed to them. They could pretend it never happened, but they'd never truly be normal anyway. Which was alright, because they weren't exactly normal beforehand. Most of the team was formed of misfits and outcasts; most of the team was alone in some regard prior to the incident. But now that they had Persona, and they were united by that common thread. And they always would be, like an undying friendship. So maybe they weren't normal in the normal sense of the word. But they were normal to each other. And that was more than enough.

"It's like... I don't even know what to do with my life anymore. I don't have to worry about shadows, or murders, or Personas... It feels liberating, you know?" Justin continued. It was strange; as happy as he was that the Midnight Channel was done with, its absence had left a huge hole in his life. It was like he felt there was something he needed to fill the gap, and with the Midnight Channel gone, that gap was now empty. It had played such a huge role in his life, that it was actually almost sad to see it go. It was an awful place that had done awful things to his family and friends, but it was still important to him in a way; always would be. Hell, Maya wouldn't be sitting besides Justin right now if it wasn't for the Midnight Channel. Justin's parents would have died regardless of what had happened with the Midnight Channel. After all, last time he checked, the Midnight Channel hadn't given his mother cancer and shot his father, now did it? He always would have ended up in Inaba. It was the Midnight Channel that had reunited Maya and Justin two years later. Yeah, it sort of completely destroyed Maya's life and killed three people, and yes, maybe Justin was being a little selfish all things considered, but in a way, he was happy the Midnight Channel was a thing because of it.

"Well, I don't know what you're going to do, but I get started with my job next week." Maya remarked, slight pride in her voice as the comment left her lips. Justin immediately burst into one of his coughing fits. First of all, how the hell did Maya get a job, and with who? Secondly, why? Is it because she felt the need to put some money into her residence here? Because that was completely unnecessary. I mean, yeah, Justin did struggle with money from time to time because of Maya's stay in his house, but she wasn't obligated to give him a single cent. He just hoped she was getting a job for some extra spending money.

"You got a job!? Where? When?" Justin started to barrage her with questions. Maya was clearly caught a little off guard by Justin's surge of inquiries as to the nature of her job. He was acting as though her job was going to jump out of his closet at night and shank him and his loved ones. And knowing Justin, he might seriously believe that. Still, she was proud that she had finally managed to get some work; even if the only reason she got the job was probably because she was friends with the manager's son. Her smile never faded as Justin seemed very uncomfortable right about now; not because anything was particularly wrong with her having a job, but because he hadn't expected it.

"Yosuke hooked me up with a job in the electronics department at Junes." Maya remarked with enthusiasm. She hadn't even asked him for the position, he just sort of offered it to her. She had made a passing comment a while back that she didn't have a job; though she was surprised he remembered that. And of course, everyone knew Maya didn't go to school. It was pretty sad actually, but they all understood Justin couldn't afford to enroll her at Yasogami, nor could any of them. Though to be fair, the only one who probably would have considered enrolling her at Yasogami was Yosuke, and he was already pushing the limit with Teddie's residence in his house. His parents were not very happy about that. Justin raised his eyebrows in even more confusion. That explanation only seemed to raise more questions.

"But you don't know anything about electronics..." Justin pointed out. Hell, she had asked if being able to go through your television screen was normal the first time it happened. I mean, it was understandable since she knew nothing about televisions... But that was kind of the point. She knew nothing about televisions. I mean, sure, she could probably study up, and she had used pretty much every piece of tech in Justin's house over the last month or two, so she probably knew a lot more now than then, but still. She was probably one of the worst people for that kind of job. Maya shrugged.

"I'm just supposed to handle the register. I don't think I need to know that much." Maya explained. She would admit herself that she didn't exactly know much about technology. That was more Justin's forte anyway, though he wouldn't dare let anyone know. She'd be lying if she said she hadn't seen Justin fiddling around with the computer in his room on a regular basis; unscrewing parts, putting new ones in. Sure, building a PC wasn't hard if you knew what you were doing, but goddamn. She didn't even think he was trying to fix the PC; just screwing around with the wires and boards on the inside. God knows he probably couldn't afford any replacement parts to update his computer anyway. Justin still felt like he had a thousand questions; like how Yosuke even knew Maya didn't have a job, or why he would even offer her one. But he didn't even bother to ask. Maya seemed happy enough; he didn't need to ruin it with a game of twenty questions.

"Well good for you." Justin remarked, cutting himself off from anymore questions. Maya blushed slightly, though in that 'Yeah, I am pretty awesome,' kind of way. For

her, this was a big deal after all. She had never had a job, but she had always needed money. It was that pursuit of money that had serious fucked her over in her life. And now she had a chance of getting it in a nice, safe way. No more mafias, or Kurts. Just minimum wage. "Just make sure you learn how to do 20% off." Justin joked.

Maya's state of bliss was immediately cut off with surprise, then a slight glare. Even when she did go to school, she failed math. Hard. She finished with a 52 average, if Justin recalled correctly, the year prior to the incident with the mafia. She almost always had to go to summer school just so she could move onto the next grade. She never was very good at math, so her family tried to be understanding. And at first, they could afford to send her to summer school. But once Maya's father slipped into that comma, they couldn't really afford it. They still sent her anyway, but god knows they always had to do without because of it.

"I can do math just fine, thank you very much." Maya glared at him angrily. She also called him an asshole under her breath, much to Justin's amusement. He thought it was hilarious how angry she was getting over something she knew she was bad at. That was like Justin getting pissed off for someone calling his cooking bad... Well actually, he got pissed at Kurt once for that; but that's beside the point. Justin smirked a bit as he realized his comment was getting under her skin. Maya almost immediately noticed the smirk and started to grimace. She knew what that meant; and that meant Justin was going to jab at her about it for the next half hour or so.

"What's the square root of twelve times three to the fourth power over fourteen plus pi times--"

"Gah! ENOUGH! You're giving me a headache already!" Maya shouted, cutting him off, as he she clutched at her head. She actually looked as though trying to parse Justin's bullshit long equation was physically paining her. It might, in fact; given that Justin was just adding numbers onto numbers to keep the equation going as long as possible. He didn't have an answer, even if she did try to figure it out.

"Feel like resigning yet?"

"A little!"